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ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary book challenges two basic assumptions that orient much contemporary social scientific thinking. Offering theory and empirical research, the book rejects the classic liberal view that people share a basic common sense or rationality; while at the same time, it questions the view of contemporary social theory that meaning is simply an intersubjective or cultural product. Through in-depth interviews, the book explores the underlying logic of cognition, finding that people reason in fundamentally different ways, and these differences affect the kind of understandings they craft and the evaluations they make. It finds that, as a result, people actively reconstruct culturally prevalent meanings and norms in their own subjective terms. The book provides a comprehensive description of three types of socio-political reasoning and the full text of three exemplary interviews. Findings in the book help explain such puzzling social phenomena as why people do not learn even when it is to their advantage to do so, or why they fail to adapt to changed social conditions even when they have clear information and motivation. Building on the ideas of Jean Piaget, George Herbert Mead, and Jurgen Habermas, the book offers a new orienting vision, structural pragmatics, to account for these social phenomena and research in cognition. The concluding chapter discusses the implications of the book for the study of social cognition, political behavior, and democratic theory. Each of the eight chapters includes notes. Contains an extensive bibliography. (BT)

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